

Skeletons Out of the Closet: The Case of the Missing 162 Percent

A Quarterly article often reveals a teacher's mind at work, providing readers a ringside seat as the teacher observes, changes, rearranges, and fine-tunes classroom practice. In this article from 1995, Bob Pressnall engages in all these things. We watch him as he keeps revising his efforts to teach revision, telling students pointed stories, drawing cartoons, and finally devising a "skeleton." It is this last strategy that moves students closer to an understanding of one way to work over a piece of writing. As Pressnall keeps revising his lesson, he notes that, "Revision is a teacher's life."

BOB PRESSNALL

Nature's Way

One morning several years ago, after my back-to-school night presentation, the parents of an eighth-grader sent me a comic strip. In the first frame a marshmallow-headed figure enthusiastically pecked at a word processor. In the second frame he stared motionless at the monitor, his trash basket full. In the third frame he sat on a couch next to his desk, the floor littered with paper. He held his head in his hands. The caption read: "Writing is nature's way of showing us how sloppy our thinking is."

I tacked the cartoon up in my classroom on the wall over the assignment check-off sheet. I'd been teaching the "joy of discovery" in the process of revision, but the cartoon suggested that one must run

a gauntlet of drafts and endure a certain amount of pain before one experienced this success. My students had progressed as writers. Most of them were no longer paralyzed by sheer terror when they faced a blank sheet of white paper. They could get something down. Many were eager to share their writing with a partner or group. I had trained them to respond in an author's-chair format, in a series of pair response exercises, and in response groups of three or four. We compiled a Dictionary of Response under the subheadings of "what you like," "what you don't understand," and "where you want more." We made class books. Furthermore, they were able to write about their writing, to reflect on their process of prewriting, drafting, responding, and so on.

Unfortunately, for all their skill and willingness to communicate through and about their writing, very few students were actually using the responses they received. In other words, no one was revising in any substantive way—a word or two changed, a sentence or phrase added, a page recopied in ink and they were out the door; no new vision was happening.

"It is possible," I preached, "to experience joy in the act of revision." Everybody groaned.

"Okay," I said, "let me tell you a story." Everybody cheered.

Revision and Reality

I tried one of my little instructive analogies. I hoped to convince them that writers must be brave enough to examine

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their drafts and make changes and that, in fact, revision had everything to do with their everyday lives.

I said, "I want to tell you the story of a time an old, old friend confided to me that he'd fallen in love for the eighth time. This was no surprise since he'd told me about his seventh and his sixth, and, in fact, I recall his very first *numero uno* back in junior high school. But there was something very different about number eight: my old buddy had a long face.

"Doug," I said. "Why so sad? You love to fall in love. You've virtually made a career of it. What's the problem?"

"I think I see a pattern," Doug said.

"No kidding," I said. "Great insight; time for a change."

"No," he said, his eyes dimming. "There's nothing I can do. I've kicked the ball, it's gonna roll and bounce around like it always does and then drop. . . . No."

"Doug's chin fell to his chest. Then he said the thing that made me really sad: 'Wake me when it's over,' he mumbled."

A few students laughed nervously at this punch line, so I dredged: "Why did Doug say, 'Wake me when it's over?'"

A smattering of students spoke out: "He was tired. He didn't want the dream to end. He was sorry. He was stupid. Number eight was ugly. Number eight was too beautiful. He didn't know what to do next." Then they started coming closer: "He didn't want to change. He wanted to change, but he didn't know how. He knew how, maybe, but he was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"It's hard to change. Things might get worse."

"Good," I agreed. "In the area of relation-

ships Doug was writing the same draft over and over again. He didn't know how to revise, and now he was afraid." I stared at the class and they stared back.

"So what happened next?" they wanted to know.

"Well, he married number eight, but that's not the point."

"Do they have kids?"

"Two, but . . ."

"Are they happy?"

"Sorta, but let's talk about what this story has to do with your writing."

"Huh?"

The bell rang and everybody dashed for the door.

"Change is inevitable!" I shouted.

Cultivating Dissatisfaction

I do not give up that easily.

"Okay," I said the next day, "let's try again. Imagine this is an art class on a field trip. We carry our sketch pads down to the bay or up to the mountain or out to the mall.

We stop in ten locations and make ten quick sketches. The next day we return to our studio and choose one sketch to turn into a more full blown piece—a sculpture or an oil painting, whatever you want."

"You mean we get to go on field trips in this class?"

"Of the imagination . . . of the memory . . ."

"Oh."

"That's what writing is all about. Or drawing. You whip out a bunch of sketches and choose a few to develop into longer pieces. You'll choose a sketch because you're passionate about it and because you want to work on it some more. You'll also choose

it because there is a tinge of dissatisfaction—that's important, to recognize and appreciate your dissatisfaction. At the point you're unhappy with your writing, if you can let yourself see it, there is the possibility of envisioning more than you have put down on the page. It is because of your dissatisfaction that you see greater, more defined shape and color. You generate new vision. You have somewhere to go. You look for a way to get there. Maybe. But first of all you have to cultivate some dissatisfaction with your writing and thinking, like that guy in the cartoon over there by the assignment checkoff sheet. Cultivating dissatisfaction is something you're not used to."

"You're not making sense, Teacher."

The next day I decided to forget the analogies and try a visual aid.

The Missing 162 Percent

"Look at this cartoon," I said, drawing on the board. "Everybody has a story in their head. Everybody has a memory or an opinion, everybody has something to say. And when they think about it, they experience it about 212 percent—like this marshmallow-headed guy here—because our minds exaggerate. Now, if you try to put it on paper and you have time, motivation, skill, and luck, you'll at best get only 50 percent onto the page because language is limited. Okay, here's the crucial part: if you reread your own paper, you still reexperience it 212 percent because we tend to fill in the gaps.

"Then, along comes your response partner"—I draw another head on the board—"who might be a fellow student, friend, parent, teacher, girlfriend, or whoever, and if she's a good reader, has time, concentrates, isn't too mad at or madly in love with you, and is not overly concerned

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Response and Revision by Bob Pressnall

with what's for lunch, when the bus leaves for the basketball game, who's going with whom, or even with her own paper, she might help. Under these circumstances, she might get 25 percent of what you've written down on the page."

Frame It or Flush It

"You know you'll be expected to revise, so you ask for some help. You ask her, 'What do you think of my paper?' Generally, she'll lean in one of two directions:

"She'll either say, 'What do I think of your paper? You wrote this? It's okay, I guess. It's not bad, it's pretty good, actually it's great, fantastic, I love it! Wow! You wrote this! Just copy it over in ink and fix this spelling word and put in this apostrophe, run down to the store and buy one of

those gold frames and give it to your grandma for her birthday, she'll love it! You're a great writer!'

"Or she'll say, 'What do I think of your paper? You wrote this? It's okay, I guess, well, I don't know. Actually, it really sucks but don't worry, I promise not to tell anyone. Just crumble it up and drop it in the nearest toilet. You've got a great idea, though. It's not a problem, really, just start over. You're a great writer!'"

Compassion and Precision

"But neither 'frame it' nor 'flush it' is likely to help you with revision. The ideal response," I announce, "has two qualities. Whoever can name these two qualities gets to go to lunch five minutes early. Here's a hint: One of these qualities allows

you to feel dissatisfied with your writing without flushing it. The other quality points a path toward satisfaction without handing you a gold frame. One starts with a c, the other starts with a p."

Hands flew up around the room. "Cut . . . paste . . . cram . . . put . . . push . . . pull . . . progress . . ." But at four minutes to lunch they were still guessing.

"Compassion and precision are the two qualities," I said. "If a response is not compassionate, or kind, it will never be heard. But if it is not precise, or specific, it does not deliver useful information."

"And what if there's nothing I like in my partner's paper?" one kid drawled.

"Then identify what you hate the least," I said.

A Hard Lesson

I thought I had made my point, and I worked for results. And although my students' ability to communicate about writing continued to improve, their drafts were still not moving; nobody was changing much of anything. Response, I was learning, did not guarantee revision. I ranted and raved about the relationship between talking and doing, communication and change, language and action, and they claimed that they were trying their best. When one student insisted that I was trying to revise him, not his writing, I almost gave up.

Then one day I returned a batch of second drafts, and Gina, the kind of student who complained if she got a B+, stormed up to my desk. "How could you?" she demanded.

"You didn't revise," I said. "You recopied in ink, corrected your spelling, and added two words."

"I don't get D's," she said. "Change it! This

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is the best paper in my response group.”

“I’m grading a process,” I explained. “You got wonderful suggestions, and you didn’t move your paper.”

Meanwhile, the rest of the class, equally outraged, grumbled behind her.

Gina leaned over my desk, flapping her paper in one hand, and fixed me with an accusing stare. “Oh, yeah?” she said. “Well, you never taught us to revise.”

Skeletons After Midnight

I didn’t think about Gina’s comment until 2 A.M. the next morning. I glared at the red digital display on my bedside clock. I began to brood about my students’ grumbings. They are too easily satisfied with the sloppiness of their own thinking. I told myself. They say it once and they think they’re done; like pigs rooting around for truffles, they’re onto the next thing. They are lazy. They don’t care. They’re too young. They watch too much video. Maybe next year . . .

At 2:30 I was still lying there. Gina was wrong. I *had* taught her to revise. I’d taught them the “footnote method” of revision, for one. Another time we’d gotten out the scissors and paste and made a huge mess. We’d examined models of drafts and constructed rubrics. What more did the girl want?

About 3 A.M. I rolled over. An insight! It occurred to me that there are at least two steps to revision. One involves getting more of the 212 percent onto the page; the other involves organizing it so that it makes sense. Why not, I asked myself, start with the first step? Their papers were skeletal and the bones didn’t hang together in any recognizable shape. They

needed an exercise in which they could practice hanging meat on the bones, maybe, a warm-up before they revised their own papers.

The next morning I wrote the following

Revision is a teacher’s life. I used to think one day I would master the craft of teaching. Then I found out I was really a student.

paragraph on butcher paper:

I walked into class late. The teacher looked at me. I sat down and opened my book. I heard footsteps approach. The teacher cleared her throat. I looked the teacher in the eye.

“That is a skeleton,” I said, pointing. “Each sentence is a bone. Your job is to bring the skeleton to life with muscle, blood, fur, claws, guts, and a beating heart. Literally, I want you to write between one and three sentences or phrases between each of the bones. You may extend sentences or change vocabulary or point of view, if you wish. For example, ‘The girl sauntered into class late, chomping her gum.’ Any questions?”

They got down to work. It was quiet for fifteen minutes. Pencils wagged.

When I asked for volunteers, Darryl raised his hand, a first for him, and read his piece:

I sat down. And I started to eat. The Teacher stared at me. I hide the things I was eating. I opened my book. Then I started to whisper to my friends. I heard his footsteps approaching. I acted like I wasn’t doing anything. He cleared his throat. I started to think about what I was going to do today. I

looked him in the eye. While I was opening a bag of potato chips. They spilled all over the floor under my desk. He started the class. I listened a little bit. I looked to see what I had missing in homework. He told everyone to sit down. I looked at the time like I always do. He started to talk about the assignments. I just started to think what bus should I catch home. Last it was time for break.

The class applauded. It was the longest piece Darryl had written that semester. Gina raised her hand. “Uh, Mr. P, did you notice that Darryl amputated the first two bones of your precious skeleton? Did he cut off the head, or what?”

“Did he bring it to life?” I asked.

“I gave it a longer tail,” Darryl said.

Who’s There?

The next day, I hung this skeleton:

The tide crept in, erasing the footprints in the sand. The beach curved away into darkness. How long till the moon rose? Another wave crashed against the nearby rocks.

“Add a person or two to the scene,” I suggested. They did. Romance, suicide, sea lions, murder, slapstick, and serenity spilled from different pens. There was no single right way to do it. Their writing was interesting. They seemed to enjoy it.

What Are They Saying?

After a brief review on the correct forms for writing dialogue, I hung this skeleton: *Kids streamed into the courtyard for lunch. Jake watched Daisy close her locker. She turned and faced him. She had that look in her eye. They headed toward the snack bar. The yard supervisor intercepted them.*

“When bringing this one to life,” I said,

"get the characters to talk to each other." They did.

What Are They Thinking?

When, eventually, everyone seemed to be writing nothing but dialogue, I brought in this one:

"You're not old enough."

"Come on, give me a chance!"

"Not now. Maybe next year."

"I'm not gonna mess up."

"I said, 'No!'"

"Show what these characters are thinking and feeling," I said, "and show their status and mood through dress and gesture."

Five minutes into it a student approached my desk.

"I can't think of a single word to go between these two bones. Is that all right?" I shrugged.

Five more minutes and another student came up: "I accidentally wrote three paragraphs between these two bones."

"Do you like them?" I asked. He nodded. "Then keep them."

Why Are They Doing It?

The speedometer showed 70 miles per hour. Jason floored the accelerator. He didn't care. A curve approached in the road.

"Okay," I told the class. "Show Jason's motivation. Show the significance of this event in his life. Put someone in the passenger seat if you want. And by the way, you must use at least three base clauses with adverbial or noun phrase extensions, like I introduced yesterday, when you bring this one to life."

"They're more like ladders," Darryl said to Gina at the end of class. "I pull myself rung by rung through the scene. I don't know what they're for, but they're fun."

"Oh, they're just a gimmick Teacher made up to kill time at the end of the period," Gina responded. "Personally, I'm sick of skeletons! Now we have social studies skeletons and essay skeletons, skeletons almost every day. It's like a graveyard around here. Why can't we just write?"

"I am writing," said Darryl.

Training Wheels

I showed my skeletons to other teachers. "Story starters," one commented. "Not bad."

"Yeah," I said, "but all I ever got from 'It was a dark and stormy night' was stuff like 'The monster jumped out of the bushes and strangled me. The end.' With skeletons they're not taking single steps, they're learning how to walk. Call them training wheels, but look at how much they're writing! It's great stuff and they love it!"

"A variation on 'show, not tell,'" said another teacher. "May I borrow?"

"Why not?" I said, and I returned to my classroom and wrote another skeleton.

Skulls, Vertebrae, and Limbs

I had demonstrated to myself, my colleagues, and my students that when writers construct narratives, skeletons help them get down more of the 212 percent. But can skeletons also help writers of exposition?

On the history side of my core class we'd been wading through primary documents, speeches, and writings from the Civil Rights Movement. On test review day, I hung the following skeleton:

In the 1960s Dr. King, Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Thurgood Marshall, and others tried to change a few things. They had many goals. They tried many tactics. They met resistance. They met success.

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As the semester advanced I asked students to flesh out other expository skeletons, adding to the bare bones of everything from interpretive essays to problem solution pieces.

Cutting to the Bone

I read three pages of Gina's ten-page essay and stopped. It was overwritten, padded and flaccid. I was used to trimming the fat from student papers just so they could recopy my edits. Then I thought of turning the skeleton exercise on its head. The next day I called Gina to my desk. "You've got some great ideas here," I said. "But they're buried. I want you to reread your paper and underline the thirteen most indispensable lines, or bones. Then show me." Gina nodded. When she brought her paper back to me, I said, "Good. Now you have a skeleton. Start from there. Build it up. Remember, you may write between one and three sentences between each of the bones. . . ."

Writing Shows Us . . .

That first year "skeletons" took over my classroom. Of course I overdid it. A single strategy does not constitute a writing program. Too much of a good thing finally prompted one student to say, "Mr. P, I wish you would just stuff all your skeletons back into your closet."

When faced with the sloppiness of our own thinking we often feel embarrassed or defensive. Then, if the reviews are mixed—frame it or flush it—we wonder who we are writing this for, anyway? With each successive draft we want to feel finished, even satisfyingly so. We turn the printer on, cross our arms, and tell ourselves that if the rest of the world is so stupid that they can't get our message, who needs them! We turn our papers in to the editor or the teacher and hold our breath.

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The nature of writing is that it leaves a record. Two hours, two days, or two years later, we may see that draft X does not match our original vision—whether it was published or not—or that our thinking has changed since we last read draft X. Maybe our vision has changed simply because we wrote draft X or because somebody else read it or is about to. We smile. We grit our teeth. Now we know what we wanted to say. We pick up the pen, turn on the PC, open the file.

If we have been doing this for years, we will see dozens, maybe hundreds, of ways to resee a piece of writing. And among the first questions we ask are the same ones

my students have learned to ask. “Where are the skeletons? Where are the bones? How can I flesh them out?”

Obviously, the solution to all student revision problems isn’t skeletons. Skeletons don’t take the place of student-generated topics, for instance, but they do teach a structure for one type of revision. They help define what revision is. Of course, for most teachers, constantly observing, changing, rearranging, and fine-tuning their practice, revision goes beyond what students do with their writing.

Revision is a teacher’s life. I used to think one day I would master the craft of

teaching. Then I found out I was really a student. Learning is endless. Learning is hard work. Learning is joyful.

Bring this skeleton to life.

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